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ABSTRACT

A study examined national data on the English language proficiency of Southeast Asian refugees at the time of their arrival (after 1975) in the United States and again in 1983. Information from an annual refugee survey was also used. Comparisons were made for: (1) different ethnic groups (Vietnamese, Chinese, Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and other) and gender subgroups; (2) refugees having American family, congregational, relative, ethnic non-relative, or other specific sponsorship in the United States; (3) region of residence; and (4) attendance in U.S. schools. A table indicates the 1983 percentages of each ethnic group's gender subgroup speaking English at each of four proficiency levels, and the mean proficiency level for each subgroup. Results show that while linguistic acculturation occurred for all refugee subgroups, the rate varied considerably by subgroup and may peak at lower levels for some. Refugees with American family sponsors demonstrated the highest rate of acquisition, and higher improvement rates were found among individuals with some U.S. schooling. It is concluded that various social factors were related to English language improvement among refugees. A 13-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Language Acquisition among Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States

FRANKLIN GOZA

Since April 1975 over 900,000 Southeast Asian refugees have relocated to the United States. Although generalizations about this group's linguistic ability abound, systematic studies documenting its English language capabilities and improvement levels are almost nonexistent (see Caplan et al., 1985, for an exception). In an attempt to fill this void, this study examined national level data to determine this population's English proficiency at the time of arrival and again in 1983. Analysis of linguistic ability levels at two different times also permitted the determination of overall language acquisition. This paper will document the English arrival abilities and improvement rates of this entire population and also illustrate the pronounced linguistic heterogeneity found among the various Southeast Asian groups. More specifically, refugee ethnic (e.g.,Vietnamese, Chinese, Hmong, Khmer, and Lao) and gender sub-groupings are compared and contrasted as their relative pace of English acquisition is determined. As ethnic and gender differences in linguistic improvement are documented, various aspects of Schumann's social distance (1976) and acculturation (1986) theories are also evaluated to determine their relevance in explaining diverse improvement patterns observed among refugee groups.

Review of Related Literature

Numerous studies have demonstrated that English ability enhances economic and social well-being in the U.S. Research on the economic effects of the English ability not only indicates a positive correlation between English capability and income levels (Grenier, 1984; Cooney and Ortiz, 1983; Tienda and Neidert, 1984), but some experts believe that "English proficiency is essential for success in the U.S. labor market" (Tienda, 1982, P. 460). Within the social realm, the sharing of a common language with the native population increases the possibility of more sophisticated interaction with host society members in ways that generally promote immigrant absorption. Furthermore, speaking the dominant language may enhance employment searches and increase opportunities to relocate to more integrated residential settings which

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often provide additional opportunities for social adaptation (Gordon,1964).

The following discussion begins with a review of several studies examining the importance of English ability on Hispanic social and economic outcomes. This research is relevant to the present discussion because Hispanics constitute the second largest racial/ethnic group in the U.S., and its largest linguistic minority.

Grenier (1984) examined the effect of language on wages among Hispanics, and the effect of language attributes in explaining the wage differential between Hispanics and non-Hispanics. His analyses of the 1976 Survey of Incoming Education indicated that mean hourly wages of Hispanics were significantly below those of non-Hispanics. Specifically, individuals not speaking English well were paid a lower wage than those with more English ability. Grenier suggested that those with a better command of English may be more productive in the workplace, and perhaps merit the higher wage. This suggestion received support as his results indicated little evidence of statistical discrimination. Rather, compositional variables, including English ability, largely accounted for the wage gap. Garcia's (1980) analysis of the same data extended the importance of English ability beyond the economic realm and demonstrated its importance to occupational prestige and educational attainment.

Rather than concentrate on the social and economic consequences of second language acquisition, as sociologists and economists often do, linguists specializing in this area generally examine the processes through which second language ability may be acquired. schumann's (1976) social distance (SD) hypothesis represents an important contribution to this type of research. The SD theory blends various social factors related to the process of second language acquisition. Social distance is defined as the distance that "pertains to an individual as the member of a social group which is in contact with another social group whose members speak a different language" (Schumann 1976, P.135). Schumann hypothesized that the greater the the social distance separating two groups, the more difficult it will be for one group to learn the language of the other.

This theory was decomposed into several observable components: the status of the second language learning (2LL) group vis-à-vis the target language (TL) group; the integration, including enclosure, strategy adopted by the 2LL group; the cohesiveness of the 2LL group; and the congruence of similarity between the cultures

of the 2LL group and the TL group. More specifically, interactions between groups approximately equal in terms of their political and socio-economic status were predicted to result in higher rates of language acquisition than were interactions occurring between highly disparate groups. The integration plan embraced by the 2LL group would determine whether this population opted to eschew its life-style and cultural heritage in favor of that of the host society, maintain its own values, or strive for a compromise situation. . It was anticipated that SD would be minimal among groups opting to assimilate, while it would be maximal among those selecting value preservation (Schumann,1976). Finally, the greater the congruence or degree of similarity between groups, the higher the expected levels of acquisition.

Schumann noted that all of these measures are relative (e.g., cultures A and B are more congruent than cultures A and C) and may not be independent, as they sometimes overlap. More recently, Schumann, (1986) argued that acculturation, which he defined as a cluster variable comprised of certain social and psychological measures, is the most important factor in predicting the amount of language ability acquired by the 2LL group. In the next section, specific research hypotheses of my study are presented which will evaluate several of Schumann's predictions.

Referring specifically to refugee population, few studies have examined the rate of acculturation among refugees in the U.S. In one such study, Caplan et al. (1985) analyzed language acquisition among Vietnamese and Laotian nationals who arrived between October 1978 and March 1982. Results from this study of five locations with large Indochinese refugee populations suggest that while attending ESL classes was responsible for some improvement in English ability, other variables such as duration of U.S. residence, Southeast Asian education, and age at arrival were far stronger predictors.

Methodology

In contrast to the Caplan et al. study (1985), the data used herein are from the National 1983 Annual Survey (ASR). These data contain information on Vietnamese, Laotian, and Kampuchean refugees entering the U.S. from April 1975 to May 1983, which make these results more representative of those experienced by the entire U.S. Indochinese refugee population. This survey was conducted by the office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) of the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services. Conducted in October 1983, this research sought a representative sample of all Southeast Asian refugees who entered this country between April 1975 and May 1983. To achieve this goal the present survey made use of "the most complete listing[s] of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States" (Bach and Seguin, 1985, P. 16) as no single list of all Southeast Asian refugees in this country existed at that time. The ASR survey construction involved combining two complementary sampling frames. The first was a file of all refugees who registered with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in January 1980, under the Alien Address Report Program. The INS file accounts for over 80 percent of the refugees entering the United States between 1975 and 1980. The second was, the ORR Master Data File, which consists of a comprehensive list of basic demographic data and addresses for all refugees entering after 1979. Thus when combined, the INS file generated names and addresses for refugees entering this country between April 1975 and December 1979, while ORR master Data File provided respondents for the next four years. Names were selected with a simple random sample from each listing in proportion to the total refugee population. A final sample of 2,500 heads of household were selected. This sample was designed to deliberately compensate for the anticipated difficulty in locating refugees who had moved. Although numerous refugees were not located, comparisons of the basic demographic characteristics of the final ASR sample with the ORR and INS data indicated that the ASR sample was unbiased (Bach and Sequin, 1985). The 1983 ASR data consists of 1, 239 households containing nearly 7,000 individuals. All the subjects were interviewed by a native speaker of the refugees' mother tongue.

Analyses of English improvement included only labor force aged men and women (i.e., those aged 16 to 64) since the ASR data did not contain no linguistic data on those under 16 years of age. English speaking and writing abilities that were determined on the original data, the ASR data, were done with a four level scale ranging from 1 to 4, with the lower value representing the highest proficiency. Appropriate scores were determined with the assistance of the trained interviewers. To avoid any ambiguity in the interpretation of these measures, I have reversed the original scale. In this study, the following scores were assigned for subjects' levels of English ability: 1, no ability; 2, a little ability; 3, good; and 4, fluency. These codes were applied to measures of ability at the time of arrival and to the measures collected in 1983. Because individual

speaking and writing scores were highly correlated, I limit my analytical focus to English speaking ability. This decision was based on the fact that many Southeast Asian refugees, especially the Laotian and kampuchean nationals, never learned to read nor write their own language. Thus, learning to read and write English, especially as adults, is very difficult for them. For these individuals learning to speak and comprehend English is not only the easiest component of language gain, but this facet of language acquisition is also the most practical as it is needed for the interpersonal interactions that occur numerous times daily. For these reasons this study's emphasis is on improvements in English speaking ability.

To measure improvement in English speaking and writing ability I subtracted the arrival score from the 1983 score. This procedure is problem free until one reaches fluency, at which time further improvement in English ability cannot occur because of the "ceiling effect." To avoid the potential bias of the ceiling effect, those refugees fluent in English at the time of arrival (less than 2 percent of ASR respondents) are excluded from all discussions of English acquisition.

Variables

In the examination of English improvement which follows, I will address several variables that merit discussion because of the importance they may have in the process of language acquisition. The first is sponsor type. Prior to entering the mainstream American way of life, each refugee not financially independent was required to have a sponsor. For a nominal stipend the sponsor agreed to provide social and economic assistance to the refugee(s) under their care. Table 1 demonstrates that during the early years of the resettlement program, sponsors were mainly local church congregations and American families, but that sponsorship roles have increasingly been assumed by earlier cohorts of resettled refugees.

This examination of sponsorship will permit us to address a current debate regarding the differential contributions of the various sponsor types to English acquisition. Some argue that sponsorship by former refugees inhibits progress towards self-sufficiency and other aspects of adaptation, such as English acquisition.

Table 1: Type of Sponsorship by Year of Arrival: All Individuals Aged 16-64, 1983

Sponsor type	1975-1976	1977-1978	1979	1980	1981	1982-1983	Total %
American family	25.1	2.4	6.1	6.7	6.7	5.8	10.3
Congregation	60.1	42.0	47.7	40.2	40.7	42.3	46.1
Nonrelative of same ethnicity	1.2	2.4	3.6	3.1	5.8	3.8	3.4
Other	4.4	11.2	12.2	11.7	12.0	8.9	9.8
Relative	8.7	21.9	29.8	38.0	34.4	38.9	29.0
Unknown	0.5	20.1	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.4	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
[N]	[804]	[169]	[507]	[869]	[781]	[530]	[3660]

Source: 1983 Annual Survey of Southeast Asian Refugees

I anticipated that an American family sponsor would provide the setting most conducive to English improvement; hence, it was hypothesized that this situation would influence language acquisition to a greater positive degree than any other sponsor type because it generally facilitates increased daily interactions with native English speakers. Congregational sponsors were also presumed to be positively related to improvement, but to a lesser degree than American families because congregations frequently sponsored a number of households, making it more difficult for them to meet the personal needs of everyone. Furthermore, the personal interactions occurring between refugees and congregational sponsors are presumed to be more superficial and less frequent than those occurring within American families, thus the expected lower levels of improvement. Other sponsor categories considered include refugee relatives, and non-relatives of the same ethnicity. I hypothesized that these sponsor types will be associated with less English acquisition than American family and congregational sponsors, since English is not generally spoken in Southeast Asian households, while it usually is in the homes of the former sponsor types. A slight reformulation of Schumann's SD theory (1976) permits us to postulate that at the aggregate level those residing with American families or congregational sponsors will experience relatively less SD than refugees residing with other types of

sponsors. Below, I examine improvement rates while controlling for sponsor type in an effort to test the validity of this aspect of the SD hypothesis.

Also examined are regional variables monitoring the area of the country where refugees were initially relocated.[1] California, where over 30 percent of the total Southeast Asian population resided in 1983 (DHHS, 1983), is the area where English improvement is hypothesized to occur at the slowest rate, given the large Asian population residing in that state and the opportunities this presents for interaction without speaking English. Furthermore, in some California counties over 20 percent of the population is Asian, a phenomenon absent elsewhere in the U.S. This type of concentration may well present opportunities to maintain high levels of enclosure (Schumann, 1976) and facilitate the avoidance of English speaking, or conversely the maintenance of non-English languages. Thus, I hypothesized that residence in areas other than California will lead to higher acquisition rates.

The effect of gender on language improvement is also monitored in this study. Men in Southeast Asia generally spend less time at home than women, and consequently more time interacting with the public. I hypothesized that in the U.S., men will continue to have more outside-the-home experiences than women, and that these additional opportunities to interact with non-refugees will lead to greater English acquisition rates. In terms of Schumann's enclosure concept (1976), women refugees are believed to have structural limitations on their abilities to interact with the host population and for this reason were predicted to acquire less English as they experience greater social distance from host society members than do their men counterparts.

A final set of background control variables explored the effect of ethnic origin in language acquisition. The justification for focusing on ethnicity as a background variable is well grounded both theoretically and empirically and need not be repeated here. Accordingly, I hypothesized that the distinctive backgrounds of the various ethnic groups (e.g., the rural and highly illiterate Hmong versus the urban and relatively well educated Vietnamese) will affect

their disposition to improve their English speaking ability. Furthermore, many of the more urbane Vietnamese and Chinese ethnics were familiar with American culture at the time of arrival, an asset I believed would enhance their readiness to improve their English ability. Thus, in terms of SD scale, the ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese who were familiar with American culture (Vietnamese and Chinese ethnic groups) were, in relative terms, were the most congruent group with U.S. society. Accordingly, I hypothesized that aggregate improvement rates will be the highest among Vietnamese and Chinese ethnics (the most westernized groups), and the lowest for the Hmong, Lao, and Khmer.

The last variable that was examined monitored the attendance of any form of U.S. schooling. It is hypothesized that those attending some educational program in this country, regardless of course duration, intensity, or subject matter, will acquire significantly more English ability than their counterparts not participating in similar programs.

Results

Table 2 indicates mean group levels of English proficiency upon arrival and in 1983, with gender and ethnicity controlled. At the time of arrival to the U.S. the mean speaking ability score of all labor force aged individuals was 1.6, rising to 2.5 by 1983. Although aggregate results indicate that improvement was the norm, there were significant differences across gender and ethnic groups reflective of this population's extreme heterogeneity.

At the time of arrival the modal English ability category for all groups, except Vietnamese and Laotian men, was *no* ability. By 1983, most ethnic and gender groups improved such that their modal ability categories were either speaking English *good* or *a little*. For Hmong and other Southeast Asian women (a conglomeration of small ethnic groups), the modal category remained *no* English ability. Table 2 indicates that at the time of

Table 2: English ability of Southeast Asian refugees at arrival and in 1983, by ethnicity and gender: persons aged 16-64

	Speaking ability at arrival						Speaking ability in 1983						
Ethnicity and Gender	None (1)	Little (2)	Good (3)	Fluent (4)	Total	Mean	None (1)	Little (2)	Good (3)	Fluent (4)	Total	Mean	[N]
Chinese													
Men	66.4	26.9	05.6	01.2	100.1	1.4	08.3	38.0	40.3	15.4	100.1	2.6	[431]
Women	71.5	25.5	03.0	00.0	100.0	1.3	16.7	42.0	32.4	08.9	100.0	2.3	[435]
Hmong													
Men	69.0	29.3	01.7	00.0	100.0	1.3	05.2	67.2	06.9	20.7	100.0	2.4	[58]
Women	94.6	05.4	00.0	00.0	100.0	1.0	48.2	39.3	07.1	05.4	100.0	1.6	[56]
Khmer													
Men	48.5	42.3	07.9	01.3	100.0	1.6	15.0	48.5	31.7	04.8	100.0	2.3	[227]
Women	69.2	28.5	02.3	00.0	100.0	1.3	37.6	45.2	16.7	00.4	100.0	1.8	[263]
Lao													
Men	47.3	48.3	03.7	00.7	100.1	1.6	08.7	56.7	30.7	04.0	100.1	2.3	[298]
Women	69.0	30.2	00.8	00.0	100.0	1.3	25.4	52.3	20.3	00.2	100.1	2.0	[255]
Vietnamese													
Men	37.8	38.3	20.3	03.5	099.9	1.9	21.1	24.4	50.1	23.4	099.9	3.0	[851]
Women	48.7	34.1	14.1	03.1	100.0	1.7	07.7	34.2	33.6	21.5	100.0	2.7	[680]
Other S.E Asian													
Men	63.0	25.9	07.4	03.7	100.0	1.4	11.5	34.6	38.5	15.4	100.0	2.4	[27]
Women	87.0	8.7	04.3	00.0	100.0	1.2	12.5	12.5	37.5	37.5	100.0	1.9	[23]

Source: 1983 Annual Survey of Southeast Asian Refugees

arrival, women of each ethnicity spoke less English than their men counterparts and that this pattern remained unchanged as of 1983. Ethnic differences in both periods were also very pronounced. Vietnamese ethnics, regardless of gender, had the highest proficiency levels both at the time of arrival and in 1983. Hmong men and women arrived with the lowest aggregate English ability levels, but by 1983 the men surpassed the proficiency levels of the Khmer, Lao, and other Southeast Asians. The arrival English ability of ethnic Chinese was relatively low, but improved so much that in 1983 their aggregate ability level was second only to that of Vietnamese.

Table 3: Change in English Proficiency Between Arrival and 1983, by ethnicity and gender: persons aged 16-64

Ethnicity and Gender	Speaking	Writing	[N]
Chinese			
Men	1.2	1.2	[434]
Women	1.0	1.0	[438]
Hmong			
Men	1.1	0.9	[58]
Women	0.6	0.5	[56]
Khmer			
Men	0.7	0.5	[227]
Women	0.5	0.4	[263]
Lao			
Men	0.7	0.5	[300]
Women	0.7	0.4	[256]
Other S.E. Asian			
Men	1.0	0.4	[26]
Women	0.7	0.3	[24]
Vietnamese			
Men	1.1	1.0	[859]
Women	1.1	1.0	[684]

Source: 1983 Annual Survey of Southeast Asian Refugees

Table 3 indicates ethnic improvement rates, controlling for gender. Chinese and Vietnamese ethnics were the groups experiencing the greatest improvement, the Khmer and Lao the

least.The results are consistent with all earlier advanced hypotheses, and provide support for the congruence component of Schumann's SD scale. Somewhat of a surprise, however, was the high overall improvement of Hmong men. They spoke almost no English upon arrival, came from a relatively incongruent society, and yet their level of acquisition was as high as that of the Vietnamese and only slightly below the Chinese improvement rate. Gender differences in English improvement levels were minimal among the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Chinese. Among the Hmong and other Southeast Asian ethnics, men showed significantly more improvement than their women counterparts.

Earlier, I suggested that Vietnamese ethnics would improve more than other ethnic groups because of their extended contact with the West, especially, the U.S. The data bolster this hypothesis. These data also support the hypothesis that women acquire English at a slower rate than men--a result consistent with Schumann's enclosure hypothesis. These results also support the hypothesis advanced by Kleinmann and Daniel (1981) that those with little formal education in their native language (e.g., the Lao and Khmer men and women in general) may lack the experience required to formalize linguistic information into understandable patterns.

According to the hypothesis of Kleinmann and Daniel (1981), women refugees were at an immediate disadvantage because they arrived not only with less English ability than men, but also with less formal education (Goza 1987). In addition, because of their cultural background, many Southeast Asian women may continue to spend a great deal of time "enclosed" in their home, perhaps falling into a pattern of isolation, which further restricts opportunities to minimize their SD or enhance their opportunities to learn English.

Table 4 permits a discussion of the hypotheses earlier advanced concerning the effect of sponsor type on English language acquisition. As hypothesized, refugees having American family sponsors demonstrated the most linguistic improvement. There was, however, no significant difference between American family and congregational sponsors concerning the rate of English acquisition. Refugees with a relative, ethnic non-relative, or other

sponsor type (a heterogeneous category of assorted groups) all improved significantly less than the two aforementioned sponsor categories. These results provided further support for Schumann's SD theory as those groups experiencing relatively less SD from the host population showed the greatest levels of improvement. They also support his acculturation argument (1985) in as much as those residing with members of the host society demonstrated the greatest degree of linguistic improvement.

Table 4: Rates of improvement by sponsor type among Southeast Asian refugees aged 16-64 (in percentages)

Rate of Improvement	Congre-gation	American Family	Relative	Ethnic Non-Relative	Other
-1	0.8	00.5	0.9	02.4	02.6
0	32.4	31.8	35.5	40.5	42.5
1	40.6	40.1	41.9	40.5	44.1
2	19.7	18.4	17.4	14.3	09.2
3	06.5	09.1	4.2	02.4	01.6
Mean rate of improvement	0.97	1.04	0.88	0.74	0.65
Improvement score ranking	2	1	3	4	5
[N]	1709	374	1085	126	379

Source: Annual Survey of Southeast Asian Refugees

Results presented in Table 5 address the issue of English acquisition by region of residence. Surprisingly, it was in the southern states that refugees demonstrated the greatest improvement. Note, however, that it was in the western states, excluding California, where refugees demonstrated the least improvement. Of the five regions considered, California was number three in terms of overall linguistic improvement, not last as hypothesized. Thus policy makers need not worry that California will become an island of non-English speakers, as language acquisition appears just as likely to occur there as elsewhere in the U.S. Not surprisingly, the

rate of English acquisition was much greater among the refugees who participated in some form of U.S. schooling.2

Table 5: Rates of Linguistic Improvement Among Southeast Asian Refugees Aged 16-64, by Initial Region of Resettlement (in Percentages)

Rate of improvement	California	N.East	N.Central	South	West
-1	00.9	01.4	01.3	01.2	00.6
0	34.6	33.4	35.8	30.7	41.1
1	40.7	39.7	39.5	43.2	43.0
2	19.4	20.6	18.0	17.7	10.0
3	04.4	04.9	05.4	07.3	05.3
Mean rate of improvement	0.92	0.94	0.90	0.99	0.78
Improvement score ranking	3	2	4	1	5
[N]	1125	509	701	838	472

Source: Annual Survey of Southeast Asian Refugees

Results contained in Table 6 indicate that the mean improvement level for those ever attending or currently enrolled in a U.S. school was nearly twice that of individuals who never enrolled in a school program in this country.

Table 6: Rates of improvement by Any of School Attendance Among Southeast Asian Refugees Aged 16-64 (in percentages)

Rate of Improvement	No Schooling in US	Attended US Schools
-1	01.4	00.8
0	42.6	27.1
1	44.8	38.0
2	09.5	25.2
3	01.8	08.8
[N]	1774	1899
Mean Rate of Improvement	00.68	1.14

Source: 1983 Annual Survey of Southeast Asian Refugees

RESULTS

This study documented English language acquisition among Southeast Asian refugees and analyzed the determinants of observed improvements. Results indicate that while linguistic acculturation occurred for all refugee subgroups, for some the pace of this acculturation proceeded at a relatively rapid pace (e.g., the Vietnamese and Chinese). For others (e.g., Lao, Khmer, and women in general), linguistic improvement occurred more slowly and may peak at relatively lower levels. This suggests that special effort must be made to achieve higher enrollment levels among all Lao and Khmer ethnics, as well as most women, in English as a Second language or other U.S. schooling programs . Otherwise, it is likely that the English ability of these subgroups will remain permanently behind that of those refugees currently enjoying a more advantageous position.

American family sponsored refugees did demonstrate the highest rate of English acquisition, although this was not significantly greater than that of those sponsored by congregations. These results suggest that whenever possible, attempts should be made to, at least initially, place refugees with sponsors whose mother tongue is English, as this type of sponsor will promote the acquisition of this language to a greater degree than other sponsor types.

The important effect of schooling on English acquisition was underlined as significantly higher improvement levels were observed among those refugees attending some form of U.S. schooling. Thus a special effort should be made to see that all refugees resettling in this country regardless of their place of origin, be given ample opportunities to study and learn, once they have been resettled.

Finally, Schumann's SD theory received numerous forms of support as various social factors hypothesized to be important to the reduction of social distance, and hence increased language acquisition, were found to be significantly related to English improvement.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Because over 70% never moved from their original state of residence, this variable also closely reflects current region of residence.

2. Auxiliary tables indicate that 24% men and 25% of women (i.e., aged (16-64) attended ESL classes after arriving in the US. Men's attendance averaged 3.3 hours per week for an average of 10.6 weeks. Women's attendance averaged 3 hours per week for 10.9 weeks.